

Re-mem-bering Who We Are:
Intersections of Environment and “Race”
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— Laurent Savoy

I.

Once I was a horse, an Appaloosa wild and full of speed. I’d run fast — up and down sidewalks, around the school playground and our yard — just to feel wind rush with me. But in the late 1960s, when the world moved beyond sense, I began to run from what I feared. Riots near our new home in Washington, D.C., left burnt, gutted remains of buildings I knew. The war in Vietnam became taped footage on the evening news of wounded soldiers, crying women and children, of places with names like Khe Sanh, My Lai. Assassinations of men my parents called “good men” meant anyone — my parents, my friends, or I — could disappear at any time. Even the familiar *Good night, Chet. Good night, David, and good night for NBC News* no longer comforted.

I learned at the age of eight that hatred could be spittle wetting the front of my favorite, mom-made, dress. One sharp memory among many: a gray fall morning on the school playground; a classmate's sing-song *never saw nothin' as ugly as a nigger, never saw nothin' as crummy as a nigger*; his eyes on me. Then running home to my closet floor where all but *that* word faded in darkness. I remember holding knees to my chest, rocking, wondering *What does my skin say? What does my skin say?*

Like many children I questioned my identity and authenticity in the world. I avoided mirrors. Emotional nourishment and safety came from my mother’s arms — and from being outdoors in a nature that never judged me, whether in city parks of Los Angeles or Washington D.C., or in wilder mountains and deserts. Voice only began to come much later, question by question, in encounters with writings that urged me to look beneath appearances and take

nothing for granted. The authors – like Rachel Carson or Viktor Frankl or James Baldwin or Aldo Leopold – seemed themselves to be seeking.

II.

I was 14 when I first read *A Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold. That his book was hailed as “landmark,” or in Wallace Stegner's words, “a famous, almost holy book in conservation circles,” I knew nothing about. In his last essay, “The Land Ethic,” Leopold enlarged the community’s boundaries “to include soil, water, plants, animals, or collectively: the land”, and his call for an extension of ethics to land relations seemed to express a sense of responsibility and reciprocity not yet embraced by this nation, but embedded in many indigenous traditions of experience.

To adolescent me, his ideas forced new troubling questions. In a book so concerned with America’s past, why was it that the only reference to slavery, to human beings as property, was about ancient Greece? Only uncertainty and estrangement felt within my teenage reach, as if the book’s “we” and “us” excluded me and people with ancestral roots in Africa, Asia, and Native America. If as Leopold wrote “obligations have no meaning without conscience, and the problem we face is the extension of the social conscience from people to land,” then what part of this nation still lacked conscience broad enough to realize the internal change of mind and heart, to embrace what Leopold had called an “evolutionary possibility” and “ecological necessity”? Why was it that at least in the United States I knew at age fourteen human relations could be so cruel?

III.

Imagine “environment” broadly – not just as surroundings; not just as the air, water, land on which we depend, or that we pollute; not just as global warming – but as sets of circumstances, conditions, and contexts in which we live and die – in which each of us is intimately part. This definition falls short without those experiences of place that are exiled or degraded or toxic or alien or migrant or urban or indentured.

The events of one’s life take place, *take place*. Have you thought about it? really, deep down in your bones?

There is no requirement that a writer deal with any particular subject – yet, it seems to me, for the genre and those who call themselves ‘environmental writers,’ there has been avoidance. The discourse has proceeded in a narrow frame, with too few voices, perspectives, and storied lives of people not of solely Euro-American descent – experiences that transcend history and point to deeply embedded conflicts in this nation.

We all carry history within us, the past(s) becoming present in what we think and do, in who we are. Ecological interdependence between human beings and the land is framed by this history, which informs our senses of place and our connections with each other. Deeply rooted values and economic norms have institutionalized exploiting and manipulating the natural world – by fragmenting ecosystems, threatening biological diversity, and changing the atmosphere’s nature through fossil-fuel burning. And few honest self-reflections have considered how the roots of such “democratic” values and institutions link, since before the country’s founding, to sanctioned violence for power and profit, to class conflict, to the exclusion of peoples of color in a still deeply racialized America.

Compromising of nature, and compromising of human beings by “racial” separatism and inequities in political and economic power, in large measure define *our* “American” past and present. Witness poor communities of color that continue to suffer disproportionate levels of environmental pollution and toxicity. Witness the continued curtailing of civil rights and cutting back of even basic assistance to the poor and disenfranchised.

We, every aspect of our lives, have *ecological ancestors* because we all have been in relation, whether admitted or not, in time and place. Key is recognizing the biodiversity of self and of others, and resisting any *mono-identity* or *mono-culture of mind, self, or knowledge* because Euro-American ecological ancestry is not the whole. Consider these examples:

As African American abolitionists fought and wrote against slavery, they also fought and wrote against the use of arsenic in tobacco fields;

The idea of wilderness as untouched land to be preserved was accomplished hand-in-hand with its forced de-peopling and removal of native peoples to reservations;

A 1915 essay in the *Atlantic Monthly* by W.E.B. Du Bois on the African roots of the First World War is as much an environmental essay as a piece written that year on the need for a national park system. But it’s never been thought as such.

This past is not past because the same types of segregation of ideas, and of people, continue. Any perceived “lack” of other voices beyond a traditional Anglo-American context continues to reflect a societal structure of inclusion and exclusion based on color, culture, class, and gender. (In recent years, though,

some of the hardest hitting works in environmental writing have come from grass-roots activism in environmental justice.)

I think self-protective silence and denial have kept too much of America from even knowing who “we” really are, and have kept a language of possibility impoverished. By this denial, this not-remembering, we are *dis*-membered, broken into pieces.

IV.

Questioned by life we are held to account.

The hard thing to cultivate is a capacity to ask significant questions about our lives in a larger world, and about lives not our own.

Can we meet all people where they are, wherever they are? Not where you think they are, or where you think they should be. It’s acknowledging and honoring difference as enriching and at the same time finding, across divisions, common interest and common humanity. Diversity is a condition necessary for life, so why not bring as much difference to bear?

Can we bring into dialogue what has been ignored and silenced, what has been disconnected or dis-membered – whether by a failure of imagination, by narrowed -isms and -ologies, by loss of memory-history, or by unwillingness to be honest?

For my eighth birthday my parents gave me Rachel Carson’s *The Sense of Wonder*, a great gift. Perhaps with re-imagined and enlarged language and frames, a different “sense of wonder” could help us have creative interaction with many audiences, a calling back and forth, an exchange:

So we can be in contact with and confirm each other;

So through the multiplicity of true voices, their real stories, we could limn bigger stories that all of these are part of.

So that – from land distribution, poverty, suburban sprawl, to even how and by whom “nature” or “environmental” writing is defined – we can dismantle the patterns of living in this country that fragment and exclude and allow one to believe you don’t have to think about or care about . . . some “Other.”

I once doubted whether Americans as a whole could choose to answer these questions broadly: What and whom do you love and respect? To what and whom are you responsible, obligated? Respect, from the Latin *respicere*, the willingness to look again. Responsibility, the ability to respond, the capacity to attend, to stand behind one’s acts.

We fail ourselves and our children to live with less than the largest possible sense of community, and we fool ourselves to live as if the past is no longer part of us. If the health of the land is its capacity for self renewal, then perhaps the health of the human family may in part be an intergenerational capacity for locating ourselves within many inheritances as citizens of the land, of nations, and of Earth, and thus within ever widening communities.

Perhaps a future of environmental writing is in those who haven’t yet spoken, and in those who haven’t yet been heard. So many, like stars in the sky.